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**Bread and Salt: Labour, Reputation, and Trust between Syrian Refugees  
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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the intersection between forced migration, labour markets, and governance. Drawing on extensive fieldwork amongst Syrian refugees in the Northern Biqa'a Valley, Lebanon, the paper argues that understanding 'refugees as labourers' is central in explaining practices of both Lebanese villagers and Syrian refugee camps. This article builds on the findings of recent labour ethnographies in the Levant (Chalcraft, 2009; Proudfoot, 2017; Sajadian, 2020; Saleh, 2016; Turner, 2016) to demonstrate the centrality of labour-capital relations to understanding the governance of newly settled communities. Labour is a fundamentally important feature in the life of a camp, interacting with and underpinning other patterns of interactions based on, for example, state apparatus, infrastructure, and inter-tribal conflict. The article presents and analyses four ethnographic vignettes of typical economic partnerships between Lebanese landowners and Syrian refugee-labourers in rural Lebanon. Each relationship entails a pattern of mirrored capacities and weaknesses, structurally replicated throughout rural Lebanon, creating an environment of labour insecurity and heightening the value of long-term, trusting relationships.

**Keywords:** Lebanon, Syria, labour, refugees, governance

*'Between you and me, there is bread and salt - do you know what that means? It means trust, friendship. Between us and the Lebanese, there is no bread or salt.'*

- Abu Taymour, a Syrian refugee-labourer

## **1. Introduction**

This article analyses the modes of interaction and governance between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in the hashish farming regions of the northern Bīqā'a valley, Lebanon. In it, I argue that labour market considerations (namely labour scarcity and reliability) were the determining factors in interactions between these two communities. In a context of legal ambiguity, segregation, and vulnerability, the importance of trust and reliability was heightened. This empowers individuals with more access to capital and reliable labour while incentivising the cultivation of long-term, trusting, patron-client relationships. While other patterns of interaction are also visible – such as those based on security considerations, clans and tribes, and friendship – in almost all cases, labour market considerations remained a conditioning factor.

Based on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanese and Syrian communities, I present four interaction vignettes between the Lebanese and Syrian communities, underlining the centrality of labour market considerations to Syrian settlement in the valley. I demonstrate how different interlocutors leveraged their social positions through labour to their economic and social benefit, and how these individual practices have had the cumulative effect of reinforcing social segregation and hierarchy. Furthermore, this article highlights the importance of historical labour migration in understanding the variegated systems of labour organisation, which were found to be far more variable and flexible than previously envisaged. Interlocutors were reflexive about these conditions and understood themselves to be both creating and navigating the social structures governing the Bīqā'a labour market.

These findings represent an important step in reconciling questions of refugee governance with understandings of migrant labour in Lebanon and more generally. They indicate that this intersection is a critical area of research in local governance studies and challenges researchers to map capital and labour movements to discover the mechanisms underpinning other, more explicit, discourses of refugee governance. Furthermore, these findings touch on an uncomfortable topic surrounding Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Lebanese interlocutors consistently believed that Syrians were not 'real' refugees – rather economic migrants whose presence was financially incentivised as part of a grand conspiracy of demographic engineering. It is tempting to skirt around such

conversations to avoid giving credence to these widely-held conspiracy theories, but this research demonstrates the need to explicitly address the delicate topic of ‘refugees-as-labourers.’

This paper continues as follows: Section 2 gives a brief overview of the literature on forced migration and the corresponding governance issues addressed by previous works. I note the absence of ethnographies of labour, specifically agricultural labour, in studies of Lebanon and highlight some recent work to address this. Section 3 provides the socio-historical context of the northern Biqa’a region, and in Section 4, I describe my methodology and some of the challenges I faced whilst undertaking fieldwork. In Section 5, I present and analyse four ethnographic vignettes encompassing the main ‘types’ of labour relationships in the Biqa’a. These vignettes demonstrate the central role labour plays in governance between and within the two communities. Section 6 concludes, identifying the importance of labour scarcity and instability in maintaining this social system and the importance of pre-war, historical labour migration.

## **2. Literature**

Mass displacement has been a recurring event in modern Levantine history and has played a key role in solidifying national identities (Chatty, 2015; Dionigi, 2017). Historical works such as Fawaz (1994) and Makdisi (2000) have explored the deep impact of displacements in the later years of the Ottoman Empire on the development of Lebanon’s political system. Likewise, Trablousi (2012) and Salibi (2003) have addressed more recent waves of displacement and their relationship with the 1975 Civil War. Despite its frequent centrality to public discourse surrounding mass migration, however, labour remains notably absent from foundational texts on mass displacement and camps (see Adey et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2018).

Studies of refugee governance in Lebanon draw from a rich body of work on Palestinian communities, which still form an archipelago of semi-autonomous camps and gatherings throughout Lebanese territory (A. J. Knudsen and Kerr, 2013). For example, Mahoudeau (2018) studied the piecemeal development of camp electricity infrastructure and surrounding disputes as a means to show the different ways of engaging in political contestation within the camp. Abourahme (2015) also used infrastructure to analyse the politics of Palestinian encampment: he tracked the changing implications and meanings associated with cement as Palestinian camps developed over time. Similarly, Stel (2014; 2016) has used the conflict and disputes over construction in Palestinian refugee camps to show the central role of ambiguity and uncertainty in refugee governance. Palestinian encampment has also been framed as exceptional, conditioning

the possibilities for governance inside refugee camps (Hanafi and Long, 2010; Ramadan, 2013). At times, research has touched upon Palestinian refugees as labourers, though mostly as a means to explain systemic poverty rather than broader governance practices (see Hanafi et al., 2012; Perdigon, 2015).

Based on Palestinian historical precedents, contemporary Lebanese discourses construct Syrian refugees as an existential threat, and the corresponding marginalising practices draw directly from Palestinians' experiences. The Lebanese 'no-camp' policy of refusing to recognise Syrian refugees or allowing the establishment of formal camps is based on fears of loss of sovereignty (A. J. Knudsen, 2016; Sanyal, 2017). Like the Palestinians before them, Syrian refugees in Lebanon exist in legal limbo – Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and does not legally recognise displaced Syrians as refugees (Janmyr, 2016). Lebanese government administration is systematically opaque, increasing precariousness and repeatedly framing the presence of Syrians as a threat to the political and demographic balance of the country (Nassar and Stel, 2019). The impact of these legal constraints on work and livelihoods is clearly documented by Jagarnathsingh (2016). A further layer of complication is added by the imposition of a 'humanitarian regime,' where non-governmental organisations and UN bodies undertake a vast number of state-like practices, often in conflict with local governance structures (Miller, 2017; Schmelter, 2016) and posing further ethical problems (Turner, 2020). There have been numerous in-depth studies on Syrian refugee experience of state and non-state governance structures, both rural and urban (Babar, 2021; Boustani et al., 2016; Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz, 2019; Christophersen et al., 2013; Dionigi, 2017a; Harb and Saab, 2014; Howden et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2017).

The centrality of individual labour considerations in migration trends and broader political phenomena in the Middle East has often featured in historical accounts (Beinin, 2001; Burke et al., 2006; Sato, 1997). In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the importance of reconciling labour with Syrian refugee governance and the Syrian Civil War more generally (Daher, 2020). Mobility between Syria and Lebanon was common in the decades prior to the Syrian Civil War, with large numbers of Syrian workers and their families regularly crossing back and forth between the two countries (Chalcraft, 2009; Picard, 2006). As the Syrian Civil War continued, fleeing refugees made extensive use of the networks and resources established by these pre-war migrants (Chatty, 2017; Stevens, 2016). The extent to which these networks facilitated and determined migration patterns remains an important topic for investigation. Recent ethnographies

such as Saleh (2016) emphasise the deep integration of Syrian labourers into broader Lebanese governance structures before and after the start of the Syrian Civil War.

Some more focussed attempts have been made to assess the import of labour to Syrian refugee migration and governance in the region. Numerous quantitative mappings of Syrian labourers in Jordan and Turkey have been undertaken (for example, Esen and Oğuş Binatlı, 2017; Stave and Hillesund, 2015), and Hartnett (2018) has given a quantitative comparative analysis on the wages of Syrian and Egyptian labourers in Jordan since the beginning of the crisis. Similarly, Pelek (2019) recently addressed the interaction between the mass displacement of different ethnic populations and the rural labour market in Turkey, demonstrating the importance of pre-existing ties and linguistic abilities. Turner (2015) has shown how Lebanon's 'no-camp' policy has created large numbers of precarious and easily exploitable rural labourers, in contrast to settlement policies that attempt to restrict Syrian labour market access in Jordan. More in-depth studies of the impact of Syrian refugee labourers on the Jordanian economy are given by Lenner and Turner (2018, 2019).

Given the novelty of the crisis, however, long-term ethnographies of Syrian labourers, especially in rural Lebanon, are lacking. For the most part, the aforementioned studies represent attempts to discern the country-wide economic impact of the Syrian refugee crisis. Granular, 'everyday' accounts of the socio-economic structures and practices that govern life in the Biqa'a camps and fields are still few and far between. Sajadian (2020) has given the most in-depth account of the emergent Biqa'a refugee-labour camp structures. She underlines the importance of the *Shawish* – a kind of labour organiser – and pre-existing labour and migration patterns as central to the economic and social life of Syrian refugee camps in the rural Biqa'a. This article addresses these gaps and builds on Sajadian's work by providing a long-term ethnographic account of life in a Biqa'a valley refugee camp. In doing so, it reconciles existing questions about hybrid-governance regimes with the central importance of the labour market in Lebanon.

### **3. Context**

The Biqa'a valley is a fertile strip of land approximately 100 miles long, located between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains bordering Syria to the East and the North. The French mandate completed its incorporation into the modern state of Lebanon in 1920, but the eastern border between Lebanon and Syria is poorly demarcated and porous, and movement between the two countries has historically been common. Before the refugee crisis, the valley had a population of approximately 500,000, the majority of whom were Shia Muslim, with a significant number of



Maronites and Catholics. There is one major North-South highway, with networks of small villages spreading up the mountains to the East and West.

The Lebanese government was historically dominated by Maronite Christians from the *jebel lubnan* region and tended to ignore Shia majority regions such as the Northern Bīqā'a (Mouawad, 2018). Contributing to this marginalisation are the valley's porous border and close economic ties with Syria, encouraging further exclusion based on conflicting loyalties (Obeid, 2010). Correspondingly low levels of popular legitimacy have mirrored the lack of central state activity and investment. Here, clans remain central to local politics, heavily armed, and fiercely autonomous from central state authority. Smuggling and hashish farming have been key to the local economy since the 1950s, with fugitives protected by political patronage and parallel military forces (Marshall, 2012). With the outbreak of the Civil War, the little state control over the valley collapsed, and kidnapping and drug farming flourished. The Syrian regime of Hafez al Assad took control of the Bīqā'a in 1977, though its forces acted more as arbiters between rival factions and clans than a sovereign power. Palestinian military forces crumbled in 1982, but the Iranian Revolutionary Guard established a headquarters in the regional capital of Ba'albeck and began recruiting for what was to become Hizbollah. By the early 1990s, Hizbollah had replaced Syria as the arbiter between the Bīqā'a clans (Hamzeh, 1994).

This situation continued throughout the *pax Syriana* period, beginning in 1990, with Hizbollah becoming increasingly integrated into the Shia community clans. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Syrian regime continued to deploy large numbers of troops to ensure its dominance throughout Lebanon. Their presence bred deep dislike for Syrians amongst the Lebanese population, subject to their arbitrary rule. In the face of mass protests, Syrian troops withdrew in 2005, and a formal Lebanese state presence slowly returned to the region, primarily through military checkpoints and bases, but also through some infrastructure investment and services. In general, however, its authority was limited: drug farming continued in plain sight of army bases, and inhabitants retained their weaponry. With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Hizbollah became steadily more involved in fighting for the Assad regime, and many Shia men from the Bīqā'a fought in Syria. Likewise, the Civil War spilt over into the Bīqā'a valley, with Syrian Islamist militants seizing and holding the Lebanese town of Aarsal from 2014 until a joint Hizbollah-Lebanese Armed Forces operation dislodged them in 2017.

As the Syrian Civil War ground on, millions of Syrian refugees entered Lebanon, and more than 500,000 of them settled in informal refugee camps in the Biqa'a valley. Anti-refugee sentiment has increased, both in the population and the Lebanese government actions and rhetoric (Human Rights Watch, 2018). However, rather than direct action, the refugee policies have generally been characterised by ambiguity and confusion, maintaining a delicate balance of political parties in national unity governments. The experiences of Palestinian refugees (A. J. Knudsen and Kerr, 2013) and the Syrian occupation loom large in informing attitudes towards the new Syrian refugees.

Mass displacement and its demographic impact play a central role in Lebanese sectarian politics. In Lebanon's consociational state, state resources and jobs are divided according to sect. However, since no census has been taken since 1932, this, in turn, is highly contested, and displaced populations are understood in terms of upsetting this sectarian balance. This sentiment was evident in the previous mass displacement of Palestinians, which set a broad tone for the current Syrian crisis. Sayigh gives the authoritative account of Palestinian refugees' ascendance and defeat in Lebanon (2015), which was framed as an existential threat to large swathes of the Lebanese population (A. Knudsen and Hanafi, 2010). As majority Sunni Muslims, Palestinians and Syrians are seen as threats who may be potentially naturalised to boost Sunni numbers. This fear looms large in both high politics and everyday interactions, especially amongst Christian and Shia communities. Any policy or practise that could be interpreted as 'normalising' the presence of these groups is treated with the utmost hostility. This manifests itself in systematic discrimination and segregation in all aspects of life, and mass evictions are not uncommon (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Sewell and Alfred, 2017; Nassar and Stel, 2019; Stel, 2020).

The figure of the *shawish* is central to this social order, acting as an informal means to outsource refugee camp governance without recognising or regularising them. A *shawish* is an individual who acts as an intermediary between Syrian camps, Lebanese farmers, the government, and non-governmental organisations. *Shawish* have been in existence since at least the 1980s in Lebanon, organising seasonal agricultural labour groups from Syria. A *Shawish* will often organise camps for the workers and transport them to and from different jobs. Migrant labourers are employees of the *shawish*, who is responsible for paying them for their labour. The *shawish* is paid by the Lebanese farmer, often taking a commission for each worker provided. As camps have become permanent, the role of the *shawish* has expanded to include leasing land and renting plots to Syrian labourers, coordinating utility provision, and setting up small shops and mosques. The *shawish* is often responsible for keeping order within the camp and managing local municipality relations and

security services. The term *shawish*, however, should be used with some trepidation. Many camps do not have *shawish* or have one in name only. Aid organisations and Lebanese often use the term to refer simply to ‘the leader of the camp,’ and Syrians do the same to simplify their dealings with outsiders. The reality on the ground is often more nuanced – some people may work as a *shawish* for a brief period, some camps may expel their *shawish*, and some *shawish* are appointed by local security forces but have no real authority over their fellow camp-dwellers.

#### **4. Methodology**

The primary data for this research project came from my fieldnotes, collected over seventeen months of participant observation in small, interlinked communities in Ba’albeck and the network of hashish farming villages in the Western mountains. Using pre-existing friendships and contacts as a foundation for the research project, I chose a specific village and camp as my primary research site. Throughout my fieldwork, I followed family and labour networks, which, over time, introduced me organically to other villages, families, and camps. Given that I was studying the interaction between two distinct communities, I split my time roughly equally between the two.

When I initially conceived this project, I envisaged different potential avenues for governance between the two communities. Having spent considerable time in the region before the research, I was familiar with discourses surrounding clan/tribe conflicts, political parties, municipalities, and NGOs. In my original research plan, these structures and the *shawish*’s role therein were the focus of my research. However, as I conducted participant observations, these assumptions quickly fell by the wayside. By the halfway point, labour had emerged as a central topic, and, as such, I adjusted my approach to participant observation. The late winter and early spring were periods of unemployment, while during summer and autumn, work opportunities abounded, and labour scarcity became visible. I involved myself in the work process, participating in multiple different types of work teams. I worked as a free labourer, part of small family piecework teams, in two-person jobs, and on larger 100-person work teams. Fairly quickly, as Lebanese villagers understood that I was a labourer and had good relations with other reliable labourers in the camp, they began to ask me to organise labour teams.

This fieldwork faced two major limitations. The first was that female voices and perspectives are underrepresented in my field data due to my position as a man. Women constitute the majority of the agricultural workforce, and the distribution of tasks is strictly determined by gender and age. As a man in an extremely patriarchal society, my ability to speak with and understand the women’s

positions and views was limited by strict gender norms. While I was able to have some conversations with female workers, the conversations were often limited or mediated by male family members.

The second limitation concerns the generalisability of my findings. This ethnography is representative of the villages and camps of the central and northern Bīqā'a. However, the region's autonomy from the formal state apparatus could mean that the practices observed are unique to this small geographic context. The illegal nature of most of the crops in question was coupled with villagers' more general hostility towards any attempts by the formal state apparatus to assert sovereignty over the region. As such, non-state governance practices were naturally more pronounced than elsewhere in Lebanon, and the importance of individual landowners was increased. However, given the Lebanese state's well-documented disinterest in governing Syrian populations (Nassar and Stel, 2019) and the more generally documented trends of hybrid-sovereignty governance practices throughout the country (Fregonese, 2012; Ramadan and Fregonese, 2017), it would be unfair to characterise the practices of the Bīqā'a as exceptional. Rather, the observed practices are more likely to represent an exaggeration of country-wide practices and tendencies.

Furthermore, while the main crop was hashish, I observed little distinction between illicit drug production and legal harvests of apples or potatoes. On an everyday basis, my interlocutors treated the crops as interchangeable, and legality had a negligible effect on labour practices. Aside from some vague comments by a few Syrians that hashish was *haram* (forbidden on religious grounds), the distinction between crops was made on the basis of labour, capital, and profit considerations. Certainly, the general context of illicit trade meant that state employees and agencies were less able to utilise whatever formal capacities they may have had. However, given my experience elsewhere in the country, this difference does not seem to represent a decisive break in labour organisation practices. For readers interested in comparison with a somewhat more licit context, I recommend Sajadian (2020).

I have selected key vignettes from my fieldwork representing both the breadth of governance interactions in which labour features and its complexities and interactions with other social norms. I have anonymised my fieldsite and interlocutors' names and changed details to prevent identification. In some cases, I have combined multiple persons into one. However, all of the

events and people described below are real, and similar cases were replicated throughout my fieldwork.

## 5. Ethnography

My fieldsite was a small, isolated village in the mountains to the northwest of the regional capital of Ba'albeck. In mid-winter, the village population was as low as a few hundred, while it would swell to several thousand in the summer. Likewise, the number of Syrian inhabitants varied seasonally, with labourers moving between family members in different camps in the valley. The villagers were almost entirely Shi'a Muslims from the same clan; hashish farming, production, and smuggling have been the central economic pillars of the area for at least half a century. While there are also many émigrés, city dwellers, and state employees amongst the villagers, almost all households in the village have some income originating in the hashish industry. Due to the illicit nature of the local economy, despite high numbers of military and state security recruits from amongst the villagers, law enforcement and the military are not welcome in the village and surrounding areas.

Hashish farming and production are among the primary economic drivers of the Northern Bq'a villages, and there is a well-established, export-based economy. This industry has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Production was curtailed at the end of the Civil War, and it was only with the collapse of Syrian dominion over the valley in 2005 that the market began to reopen. Supply shortages meant that hashish reached astronomically high prices – \$1200 per kilo in 2012. Over the past decade, these high prices have gone hand in hand with the opening of new markets and smuggling routes, greatly increasing the reliability of the hashish trade for small-scale farmers whilst reducing the production risks. This, naturally, led to an increase in demand for seasonal agricultural labour, almost entirely provided by Syrian migrants. While the price of hashish plummeted to around \$125 per kilo in 2020, intensive production has continued, as have the labour demands that go with it.

My primary fieldsite was a far cry from the seas of tents often associated with Syrian refugee camps. Situated about half a kilometre down the road from the village, the camp consisted of some 60 tents clustered together in rows on a hillside, surrounded by trash and small children. The 400 or so inhabitants come and go on foot, motorbike, or are collected before a shift by Lebanese villagers driving 4x4s. The refugees had slowly arrived as the Syrian Civil War ground on and ISIS seized their home village near Raqqa in 2014. At first, they made deals with private landlords or squatted

unused land, but in 2016 the municipality and a local NGO gathered the various tents to a more manageable location on the outskirts of town, providing water and utilities. Some families rented rooms in the village, and around 20 tents remained on private land, despite the best efforts of the municipality.

Camp dwellers were all from the eastern Raqa'a governorate. While Lebanese villagers often referred to them as 'nomads' or 'Bedouin,' camp-dwellers rejected these labels. They were members of two settled tribes and proudly referred to themselves as *shawi*, a loose term associated with the Sunni towns and tribes of Hassakeh, Raqqa, and Deir Ez Zour. Syrians living in the village instead originated from more western, majority Kurdish, regions. Both communities had relations to the village that long predated the Syrian Civil War. While many owned and had farmed small parcels of land in their home villages in Syria, this was generally considered a supplementary income, and not a particularly profitable one. Income from small-scale agriculture in Syria paled in comparison to income from seasonal wage labour in Lebanon's booming post-Civil War economy. As young men, they came to the Biqa'a in the mid-90s in search of work and established seasonal labour relations with local Lebanese farmers. As the Lebanese economy and the hashish industry grew, these men brought more and more family members with them for the harvest season, returning to their villages in Syria for the period of unemployment during the winter months. With the onset of the Syrian Civil War, these groups expanded and began staying year-round. Despite being, for the most part, Assad supporters, as Sunni Muslims, they were suspected of being rebel or ISIS supporters by local Christian and Shia Lebanese communities.

In previous years, the seasonal work had been a relatively lucrative business – the going rate for unskilled labour was three thousand Lebanese lira an hour, but more skilled workers could command four or five thousand an hour. *Maqton'a* (piecework, paid by the completion of a task, regardless of time taken) was also common, and distinct bartering frameworks and references existed for different tasks in hashish production, construction, and orchard work. An able-bodied, competent young man or woman could make at least forty, and up to eighty thousand Lebanese lira per day during the harvest season. Before the economic crisis of 2019, this was 30 - 50 USD a day, a huge amount of money in Eastern Syria. Many of the older generations of Syrians had bought land and built houses in their home villages with these wages before the Civil War. Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, entire families, including non-workers, have fled to Lebanon, abandoning their land and houses or leaving them with relatives. There is little incentive to return to Syria – job prospects are bleak, houses and property were lost in the War, and the Syrian lira

was hit by hyperinflation, rendering wages worthless. Furthermore, almost all of the men are wanted for mandatory military service with both the regime and anti-regime forces, and returning would risk arbitrary detention by the authorities on other unknown charges.

Despite this, many of my Lebanese interlocutors repeated the refrain that the Syrians were ‘not real refugees, they used to come here to work before the War, and then go back to Syria,’ and now that ‘Syria is safe, they must return.’ The view that Syrians were staying in Lebanon to collect aid money was widespread amongst my Lebanese interlocutors. This was largely coupled with a belief in conspiracy theories about foreign plans to use Syrians to engineer demographic change. This fear of migrants upsetting the delicate balance of power in Lebanon is central to Lebanese political discourse and foundational to the current regime. Aid from the UN and other organisations certainly factored in Syrian refugees’ decision to stay in Lebanon, but it was hardly decisive. Before the 2019 Economic Crisis, Syrian refugees with up-to-date paperwork were usually eligible for \$27 per person monthly from the World Food Programme, and some poorer families qualified for an additional monthly \$180 in cash assistance. However, for many, due to Lebanese bureaucratic obstacles, registration was impossible. This income represents only a few days additional days’ wages each month but was the source of extreme resentment by many Lebanese villagers. Syrians were constantly rumoured to have huge stacks of cash buried underneath their tents, and those who were not completely destitute were often seen as ‘liars.’

While it is deeply conditioned by local political history and identity, this Lebanese hostility towards Syrians echoes a broader global trend of attempts to distinguish between the categories of ‘refugee’ and ‘economic migrant.’ As has been noted elsewhere, concerns with this distinction tend to be, at their core, ideologically motivated (Goodman et al., 2017; Long, 2013). All of my Syrian interlocutors were self-described refugees and, as with all Syrians, would face serious danger should they try to return home. Attempts by an academic researcher to apply international frameworks such as the Geneva Conventions to each of their cases would be a strange, quasi-imperial imposition of European legal codes upon a context where they have little meaning or legitimacy. As such, I take them at their word, treating them as both refugees and migrant labourers; there is no reason to treat the two as mutually exclusive.

The beginning of my fieldwork coincided with the Lebanese economic collapse. This had been looming for some time, as it had become apparent in recent years that Lebanon would be unable to service its massive debt, most of which was held by domestic banks (for background on this,

see Berthier, 2017; Safieddine, 2020). In 2019, banks found themselves in a liquidity crisis and closed their doors, and the inflated value of the Lebanese lira began to collapse. As the scale of the crisis became apparent, the central bank was unable to maintain the peg of the lira to the dollar, and the exchange rate shot up. As imports are paid in dollars, but wages are paid in lira, this meant a huge drop in the population's purchasing power. Similarly, aid money for the Syrians dwindled to nothing in 2020.

For farm labourers, this was critical: hourly wages amongst my interlocutors dropped from \$2 to 30 cents in a matter of months. Likewise, unpaid back-wages, sometimes running into the thousands of dollars, became worthless. The same occurred for Lebanese state employees – a private soldier's pre-crisis wage had been around \$700 a month, which shrunk to \$100. Being one of Lebanon's few exports, the hashish market was partially protected from the crisis. But even here, the price of fertiliser, farm machinery, and repairs rose astronomically. For smaller farmers who sold their product domestically to larger smugglers, prices did not drop as severely as other products such as potatoes, but smugglers offered payment only in Lebanese lira.

The atmosphere, then, can be characterised as one of deep-seated insecurity and mistrust. When discussing the relationship between the two communities, as one of my Syrian interlocutors put it, '...bread and salt - do you know what that means? It means trust, friendship. Between us and the Lebanese, there is no bread or salt.' It is against this backdrop of economic and social disruption that the following labour relationships, and the trust which emerged from them, played a central role in refugee governance.

#### *Vignette I – Friendship and Partnership*

"So, how much does Abu Ali owe you?" I asked. "Hmmm... let me see," said Anwar as he tinkered with the fuel injection of his motorcycle, muttering under his breath as he counted up the hours he and his brother had worked watering Abu Ali's hashish fields over the past few weeks. "I think 500 thousand, something like that," he said before blowing down a small tube from his motorcycle to clean it. "Oh, and will he pay? Or will he cheat you?" I said. After almost a year of participant observation in the Syrian camp, I had grown used to stories of farmers renegeing on agreements and brushing off Syrian labourers who ask for money owed. Anwar told me that this had happened to him several times, so I was surprised that he had continued to work for so long without being paid. "Abu Ali will pay me, for sure," he replied, with a tone of certainty, "He is *baqani*." This word



is used to describe people who are honest and treat others justly – amongst the Syrians; it is used to refer to those Lebanese who pay the wages they owe their workers.

Anwar is one of my main interlocutors in the camp, where he has lived with his wife and children since they fled ISIS in 2014. He has a quick smile, showing a chipped front tooth, and moves with the sharp, abrupt steps of a man used to heaving bricks and bales all day. Anwar has a slightly ginger beard and creases in his forehead that make him look far older than 24. He and Abu Ali were examples of the mutually beneficial relationship that Syrian labourers and Lebanese landowners often cultivated: the main channel of interpersonal interaction between the two communities. The trust that Abu Ali was *haqani* was central to this relationship and reverberated far beyond the certainty that Anwar would be paid for his labour.

Abu Ali was Anwar's main employer – a gruff, straight-talking Biqa'a villager in his fifties who worked as both a medium-sized hashish farmer and a construction worker, organising *warshat* (workshops). These mostly consisted of small groups of labourers to build the concrete and cinderblock walls, floors and ceilings for the ever-booming housing market. For the past two years, they had worked together intermittently – through him, Anwar had learnt how to pour and set concrete and the finer details of hashish production. Their relationship was obviously hierarchical but was also one of friendship – they quite liked one another, joked and drank tea together, and communicated regularly, even when there was no work to be discussed. Anwar was a key member of Abu Ali's team and would be automatically included in any work Abu Ali had. Similarly, it was assumed that if Abu Ali needed a labourer at short notice, Anwar would prioritise him. As time went on and Anwar became more experienced, he organised his own *warshat* and jobs independently, employing other Syrians that he knew from neighbouring camps. Despite this, he continued to make himself available whenever Abu Ali needed him. Several times, I found him juggling various jobs to meet one of Abu Ali's last-minute demands, at no apparent financial benefit to himself. He referred to Abu Ali as *mualemi* (literally meaning 'my teacher,' but often used as a term of respect for a master of a trade or a boss) and trusted that his wages, often several hundred dollars, would be paid. Abu Ali always paid Anwar, never taking more than a few weeks, and never disputed Anwar's account of his hours, which he kept a record of in a small, well-worn notebook. Anwar did not extend this trust to other Lebanese employers and was much more reticent to work for them, often asking for his wages in small chunks as the work progressed.

The benefits of this relationship for Abu Ali became clear as the harvest season began and labour shortages for the hashish harvest started to show. Despite a swelling of the Syrian population in the summer months, with Syrian labourers coming from other camps down the valley to stay with family members, supply just could not meet demand. Many Lebanese farmers who did not have established long-term relationships with Syrian labourers struggled to find workers for their crops. Dozens of farmers would pull up to the camp to find labourers, only to be met with silence as all the workers were already in the fields or too tired to take on another job. Furthermore, if a Lebanese farmer had failed to pay labourers in previous years or had had disputes over the final bill (very common occurrences), it would be well-known in the camp, and even the most hard-up Syrian would claim they were too busy to work. Abu Ali, on the other hand, faced none of these problems. He could rely on Anwar to organise a small work team to weed, water, and cut his fields. These workers, usually drawn from Anwar's extended family, trusted that his relationship with Abu Ali would ensure they would be paid. This trust even extended to Abu Ali's relatives, for whom the work team laboured during the harvest season, under Abu Ali's guarantee. This relationship was the basis for what would be an otherwise very unstable labour relationship.

The converse also applied. When Anwar had a problem with other villagers, he could turn to Abu Ali, an older, respected member of the local Lebanese clan, for support. This happened several times over the course of my fieldwork. In the midst of the harvest season, a villager called Abu Jamal (discussed in the fourth vignette) arrived at the camp with his sons to coerce labourers into working his fields for free, waving guns and rounding up Syrians like indentured servants. Watching the operation of intimidation, I noticed that Anwar's tent, with his wife, brother-in-law, and children, went unmolested. Abu Jamal had a list of the camp inhabitants, and Anwar was hardly an unknown character, so I was confused as to how he had managed to avoid the round-up. When I asked, Anwar smiled mischievously, '*Mualemi* Abu Ali spoke to Abu Jamal. He told him, "Anwar is my worker, and you don't come near my workers."' As neighbouring villagers from the same clan, for Abu Jamal to ignore this claim on Anwar's labour would be a grave insult to Abu Ali and cause no end of problems within the Lebanese community. By binding himself to Abu Ali, Anwar had not only saved himself from three or four days of forced labour at the height of the season, but also the indignity of being intimidated in his own home in front of his wife and children.

Their relationship also played a role in moderating internal camp disputes. Anwar and his brothers began feuding with another set of brothers in the camp, who accused him of 'stealing' some

lucrative welding work down in the village. Harsh words were exchanged, which erupted into violence twice. The second time, one of the other brothers was seriously injured and had to go to hospital. This ran the risk of serious violence and had the potential for someone to be evicted from the camp or worse. As blood was high and dark words were muttered, Anwar turned to his Lebanese patron, visiting Abu Ali one evening for coffee and explaining the situation to him. The opposing set of brothers did likewise, visiting their own regular employer from the Lebanese community, another older clan member of similar stature and connections. After some discussion amongst themselves, the patrons came to their own decision – they would not take sides, but any further violence would lead to both aggressors being ejected from the area. With this heavy-handed, but effective, ultimatum, they handed responsibility to the Syrian internal tribal mediation process. However, the Lebanese patrons' intervention was enough for both sides to calm down and for the feud to be brought under control, with neither side losing face.

The two also considered other business ventures. Like the rest of the village, the refugee camp siphoned electricity from the national power grid and did not pay for *dawleh* (state) electricity. However, this supply was intermittent and, while the village had private generators, the camp was left without electricity for long periods. Muhammad, the enterprising sharecropper discussed in the next vignette, had at one point bought a generator he used to supply his camp neighbours for a monthly subscription fee. However, since his customers were all relatives, he struggled to collect back payments. His cousins would claim they didn't have anything, and he would be unable to push the issue further. Eventually, tired of losing money on diesel, he cut the supply to the whole camp.

Anwar and Abu Ali schemed to take Muhammad's place. A Lebanese villager would never be able to keep track of the changing status of the 400 or so camp inhabitants or visit frequently enough to maintain a generator or chase up bills. Similarly, a Syrian would struggle to collect fees from his neighbours and relatives or have enough savings or security to buy and maintain a generator. However, combined with a Syrian undertaking the collection visits and follow-ups, and the Lebanese capital and latent threat to those who do not pay, the business venture showed signs of being profitable. They had more plans for providing internet to the camp, should this venture work out. This plan was more of an explicit partnership, built upon previous patron/client practices and the associated trust.

This relationship between Anwar and Abu Ali exemplifies the beginnings of a fragile partnership and friendship between Lebanese villagers and Syrians replicated throughout my fieldwork. Unlike the older men of the camp who provided their families' labour to the local *shamish* (discussed in Section 3), younger, savvy younger men like Anwar seemed to prefer the independence of these individual, private agreements. While deeply hierarchical and following a patron/client pattern, there were clear elements of reciprocity that emerged. As trust developed between these two men, it was clear they realised that working together was easier and more profitable than separate, casual agreements. This trust built upon the material requirements of labour but spilt over into other areas of life, such as feuds and camp infrastructure provision. These relationships are inherently precarious and require constant maintenance but, if successful, offer far more security than alternative arrangements.

As the financial crisis continued, a new strain on their relationship emerged: over the course of my fieldwork, hyperinflation had decreased the purchasing power of Anwar's wages by almost 80%. While Abu Ali still paid on time, Anwar began to push (respectfully, of course) for a higher hourly rate. For example, he made jokes about the value of his Lebanese lira wages in US dollars and dropped hints about how he hadn't eaten meat for months. On the other hand, Abu Ali was wary of any deviation from the 'fixed wages' that had been in place for years and would respond by deflecting, perhaps by jokingly repeating the stereotype that Syrians all kept stacks of cash beneath their tents. So began a guarded, uncertain re-negotiation of their delicate agreement, which, as far as I can tell, is still ongoing at the time of writing.

## *Vignette II – Sharecropping*

‘This year, I think I have 30 *dunam*,<sup>1</sup>’ said Muhammad, as he sipped his tea. ‘Hmm, no, wait, more like 40.’ he corrected. As the potatoes sizzled in the embers, we warmed ourselves by the fire against the November frost creeping in over the fields. Muhammad is a greying, taciturn Syrian man in his early 40s who works as a sharecropper with Lebanese villagers. He plants potatoes and hashish, and his teenage son is working behind us in the small outhouse, weighing bags of potatoes from this year’s harvest. ‘The prices are rubbish this year, and I spent a lot, but it is better than three thousand [Lebanese lira] an hour.... before the crisis, there was money,’ he said wistfully.

Sharecropping is a common, established practice in the villages of the Bīqa’a. In my fieldsite, small landowners would often give their land to a more experienced farmer for what they colloquially referred to as *daman*. No money would change hands, but the farmer would work the land, and at the end of the year, give the landowner a portion of the final crop. Within most of the smaller Bīqa’a villages, a framework exists to guide the percentages and responsibilities of anyone wishing to do so. To the north of the village, where the land was richer and the water plentiful, the landowner would provide the winter ploughing and water, and the sharecropper was responsible for everything else. They would then split the crop in half upon harvest. To the south, the land was more capital intensive, requiring substantial quantities of fertiliser and complex, large-scale irrigation systems. Here, the landowner would take at most 25% of the final crop, but the sharecropper would be responsible for organising the water supply. Larger scale, capital-rich Lebanese tended to engage in the latter, while poorer Syrians would engage in the former. As with Muhammad, the Syrian involved was almost always an older man who had been working seasonally in the village for a long time, often before the War, and had an established reputation.

Some Syrians, such as Muhammad, had made tens of thousands of dollars from this practice during the hashish boom of previous years, much more money than they ever could have through wage labour. One *dunam* of land could produce roughly 2 – 8 kilos of hashish, which, even in the worst pre-crisis years, sold for \$300 each. A canny sharecropper who knew how to leverage his family’s labour could be looking at easily \$1,000 profit per *dunam*, after expenses and splitting the crop with the landowner. Men like Muhammad reinvested this money in land and capital machinery, both in Lebanon and back home in their Syrian villages. Muhammad had invested his profits carefully, buying cars, generators, and land back in his hometown near Raqqa. As my fieldwork got underway, however, Muhammad was pessimistic about his profits in the coming year. With the

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<sup>1</sup> A local measurement of land, roughly equal to one thousand square meters.

price of hashish hovering at \$125 per kilo and the soil *ta'aban* (tired) from years of intensive farming during the boom, profits were being squeezed, and he was lucky to make even \$5,000 in 2020.

Muhammad was juggling several of these sharecropping agreements. He and his family had worked seasonally in the village before the Syrian Civil War as wage labourers. When ISIS took over his hometown near Raqqa in 2014, they settled in the Biqa'a, and Muhammad began to work year-round as a sharecropper. This year, he had about 40 *dunam* of land in the village and refugee camp area, pieced together from four different Lebanese villagers. He further leveraged these agreements to access disused hashish production facilities (including machinery for processing and storage space) owned by one of the Lebanese landowners. He planted hashish, potatoes, and a large kitchen garden of which he was particularly proud. The Lebanese villagers tended not to pay much attention to his work schedule or what else he gleaned from the land, as long as they received a reasonable portion of the crop at the end of the year. Even with the plummet in prices, Muhammad was insulated from the worst effects of devaluing wages and had his plentiful kitchen garden to offset the rise in food prices.

Furthermore, as an established name, he and his family had a higher degree of protection from harassment by the local police and Lebanese *shebab* (young men). Not merely a wage labourer, several Lebanese villagers had a vested interest in Muhammad being able to come and go freely to tend to the crops, and for him to stay to work the fields for the full year. In cases of Syrian sharecroppers, deeper guarantees seemed to bind the Syrian to the Lebanese. While no formal contract was drawn up for the land, the Lebanese villager might act as a *kafil* (sponsor) to regularise the Syrian's legal paperwork, supporting them with their connections through the opaque Lebanese bureaucracy. They might also become a *wakil* (guarantor), so the Syrian could legally register and drive a vehicle without fear of being stopped by the police or other villagers. Muhammad had both of these agreements with men whose land he was farming.

The Lebanese villagers who engaged in sharecropping were often absentee landlords who wished to profit from land they owned while keeping the illicit production at arms-length, usually because they were employed by the state. This gave them the relevant 'on paper' authority to support the Syrian through bureaucratic processes, but also the incentive not to be fully committed to hashish farming and the legal problems that go with it. While most sharecropping arrangements concerned hashish, it was not unusual for Lebanese landowners to engage in similar agreements to manage their orchards. In addition, giving the land to a Syrian was also a way of avoiding conflict between

Lebanese villagers. It established a 'buffer' for disputes over water rights or inheritance. Several times, I observed that the misrouting of water, resulting from a failure to coordinate between the Lebanese farmers responsible for the water, was blamed on a 'stupid Syrian.' Sharecroppers like Muhammad would humbly and politely apologise, treating their scapegoating as the cost of doing business. Similarly, if several Lebanese brothers shared a piece of land, it was often easier to hand it over to a sharecropper and collect and divide the crop at the end of the year than to coordinate and divide responsibilities between the various claimants.

Those Syrian sharecroppers that were successful, like Muhammad, often had access to a large pool of household labour, with capable wives and older children. Younger Syrian men without the same level of knowledge and family resources and relationships tried and failed. At the end of the year, adding up all their labour costs and the unforeseen overheads, combined with plummeting prices and low yields, they saw their profits squeezed down to nothing. Older, more experienced men such as Muhammad cleverly leveraged their relationships to avoid these costs. For example, Muhammad could borrow a tractor for ploughing from one Lebanese landowner, hashish production machinery from another, and free leftover fertiliser from a third. The practices of sharecroppers like Muhammad represent another, perhaps more explicitly economically motivated type of Lebanese-Syrian relationship, founded upon Muhammad's ability to source and organise Syrian refugee labour to work Lebanese land. Once again, it is clear how this partnership spills over into other aspects of life, regularising Muhammad's legal status and his position as a growing landowner back in his home village in Eastern Syria.

### *Vignette III – Shawish and Large Labour Teams*

From early September, the normally sleepy villages of the northern Bīqā'a are alive with activity. At sunrise, tractors arrive at the refugee camp, collecting raucous trailers full of Syrian workers – mostly young teenagers with colourful scarves wrapped around their heads and dangerously brandishing sharp-toothed sickles. The main attraction for Syrian settlement in the region is the abundance of work from the end of summer through to the winter months, and Syrians from camps in other parts of the valley often travel to the area to stay and work with family members for the harvest season. In most villages in the area, there are large-scale farmers with hundreds of *dunam* of hashish for harvest. This must be done entirely by hand throughout September, requiring teams of almost 100 labourers working from 7 until 4, every day, for at least a month. Production work requires smaller teams but is still labour intensive and continues through the winter. The harvest work is deeply gendered – labourers are referred to as *binat* (girls) though almost half are

actually teenage boys. Men generally have roles as overseers or work in smaller teams involved in the 'male' tasks of loading and unloading the large bales of hashish.

Syrian refugees comprise these teams, run in a delicate, complex business partnership between several Syrian men from Raqqa and the larger hashish farmers. During my time in the Biqa'a, one tribe member, Abu Ibrahim, an older man and one of the first to arrive in the Biqa'a from Syria in the early 1990s, acted as a *shawish*. He organised the work teams from the refugee camp and other Syrian families in the village. His ability to do so was based on his established reputation among his extended tribal network from Raqqa. In many ways, Abu Ibrahim owed his position to being of the correct social stature to be allowed to chastise his cousins' children whilst in the fields. He then coordinated the organisation of the work teams with another member of his tribe and a Western Syrian, who were employed by a larger Lebanese farmer called Hussein on a monthly salary. These two men would keep a written record of the workers and wages owed, but they deferred to Abu Ibrahim in coordinating with a given Syrian family about how many of them would work and how much they were owed.

Abu Ibrahim was largely a figurehead around which coordination centred; he did not have much of the coercive or exploitative powers that I have seen *shawish* exercise elsewhere. However, while his position was symbolic, it also had practical implications. He did not take a commission (a cut of each labourer's wages) as other *shawish* do further down the valley – for some of my interlocutors, this meant that Abu Ibrahim was not a 'real' *shawish*. However, he and his family did get priority in smaller work teams at other times of the year.

This system of labour was only possible for larger farmers like Hussein with high levels of liquidity. Hussein was both a large farmer and was directly involved in smuggling the hashish abroad, so sold his crop for a much higher price and was paid for it regularly in US dollars, unlike other, smaller farmers who exchanged their crop locally for Lebanese lira. Larger farmers' ability to muster such work teams was partly due to their fiercely protected reputation as *haqani* men, who pay wages exactly and immediately. Any labourer on these teams that wished to be paid their wages could do so at any time, at a moment's notice, and they were keen to demonstrate this to me. This is a huge liability borne by Hussein, who would owe tens of thousands of dollars by the end of the harvest season. Given the size of his operation, maintaining a team of this size was essential to harvesting before the crop went bad in the fields. Even the hundred labourer teams were not



enough – several times over the course of the harvest season, Hussein was forced to engage *shawish* from outside the local Syrian community to harvest the crop in time.

This need for large labour teams was the main reason for the Syrian encampment at my village fieldsite. The larger farmers like Hussein trod a delicate line, balancing their specific requirements with their neighbours' need for labour and the hostility towards the Syrians' presence. During the harvest season, other Lebanese farmers faced acute labour shortages – without the liquidity or reputation to organise large teams, or long-term relationships like that of Abu Ali and Anwar, many of these farmers risked losing their crop before they could harvest it. This could turn dangerous – these farmers would frequently threaten the camp with violence, and it could be a source of conflict between the larger farmers and their neighbours. The larger farmers responded as best they could, regularly trying to placate irate villagers who couldn't find workers. Hussein, the main source of income for Abu Ibrahim's work team, intermittently directed the team to harvest his neighbours' land under his guarantee of payment. In this way, Hussein strove to avoid accusations from his neighbours that he was hoarding the desperately needed Syrian labour. Once more, Lebanese agricultural capital's labour requirements were central to issues of Syrian encampment, as well as Lebanese farmers' maintenance of their *haqani* reputation.

In many ways, the financial crisis magnified the advantages of farmers like Hussein with access to large US dollar capital. He could afford to placate his large work team with a nominal raise of 500 Lebanese lira per hour, which did not come close to offsetting the loss in purchasing power caused by hyperinflation. His access to dollars allowed him to further improve his reputation as *haqani*, whilst simultaneously insulating him from the collapse of the local currency.

#### *Vignette IV – Forced Labour*

Some Lebanese farmers took a completely different approach to solving the labour shortage, as I learnt one hot September morning in the camp. I was drinking tea and chatting with Wa'el, one of my interlocutors, in his tent when we heard some shouting outside and the rumble of an engine. We poked our heads to see what was going on and saw an older Lebanese farmer I knew as Abu Jamal, who had driven his tractor down the central track of the camp. He was shouting at a group of women who were pleading with him, while his adult son marched up and down the camp, waving an automatic rifle and shouting into various tents, 'Come on, get to work!'

Abu Jamal was a mid-sized farmer and known for never paying his workers. As such, he couldn't gather any labour to work his fields – whenever he or his sons came to the camp, Syrian labourers made themselves scarce, or made clear that they were on their way to another job. Instead, Abu Jamal claimed that he owned the land upon which the camp was built, something he repeated to anyone who would listen. Since the Syrians were staying on his land and not paying rent, he reasoned they ought to at least work his fields for the harvest season. On this basis, Abu Jamal decided that each household had to provide him with one labourer for the time it took to harvest his fields. He explained this all to me from his tractor, certain that I would agree with the rationality of his argument.

However, Abu Jamal's claim was not quite as clear cut as he seemed to think. When it was first established, the camp was deliberately positioned on some of the least desirable land in the area. The municipality and NGOs had instructed the refugees to set up their tents on what had previously been steep, unfarmable scrubland. All of the villagers I spoke to were certain that the land was either owned by the state or divided between so many villagers that no one could ever make a coherent claim. The other villagers roundly dismissed Abu Jamal's claim to the land, but he continued to fiercely assert it.

While the other Lebanese villagers did not share his claim, his attitude of entitlement towards Syrian labour certainly was. They disapproved of his explicit exploitation of the camp, but their opposition to Abu Jamal's practices never reached confrontation; it mostly consisted of muttering, 'What, are the Syrians his slaves now?' Many Lebanese farmers expressed hostility to the idea that Syrians had any 'right' to wages, but rather thought that, as guests in Lebanon, the Syrian refugees should be grateful for anything they received. While not universal, the general attitude amongst the smaller farmers was that an idle Syrian during the harvest period was obliged to work for any Lebanese who demanded his labour, and should be happy with any payment they deigned to give him. Of course, in specific cases, patrons like Abu Ali would protect their clients, but those Syrian refugees without a patron powerful enough to stand up to Abu Jamal were subject to his press-ganging.

Abu Jamal's approach was simple – come harvest period, he would decide when he wanted to harvest. He had a list of the families and tents in the camp he had acquired from a patron-client relationship with another Syrian, eschewing any need for a *shamish*, and demanded one adult worker from each household. If anyone refused, he would drive his tractor into their tent and crush it,

along with their belongings. This was no idle threat – he had partially destroyed the tents of two of my interlocutors who tried to resist him in previous years. His sons would come to the camp with him, toting automatic weapons they would occasionally shoot in the air for added effect. Syrians would try to avoid his claims on their labour, pleading prior engagements, infirmity, or simply by hiding or appealing to patrons amongst the Lebanese villagers. However, for most, this kind of exploitation was simply the cost of living and working here. As Abu Jamal veered his tractor dangerously close to the tent of a woman trying to plead her case, I asked Wa’el, ‘Why isn’t he harassing you?’ Wa’el smiled grimly before leading me back inside, ‘My sister has been down working in his fields since yesterday morning,’ he said.

While this is an extreme approach, forced labour was surprisingly common. A more frequently deployed tactic used by many villagers was to simply delay payment to Syrian labourers repeatedly, for months on end. When the Syrian labourer asked one too many times, the farmer would take offence at what they characterised as a lack of trust. This would provoke a more general argument in which they would threaten the Syrian, who would take the hint and forget about the wages. Every single one of my Syrian interlocutors had experienced this on multiple occasions, and this created an environment where engaging in wage labour was fraught with risk. These fraudulent, exploitative practices reinforced the importance of Syrians seeking patrons and guarantors amongst the Lebanese population or working for a *shawish*.

## **6. Conclusion**

In these four vignettes, we can see the fundamentally important role of labour in conditioning the governance of Syrian refugees. Other factors played a role in the actions of my interlocutors, but wage labour remained a key determinant of the pattern of conflict and resolution. Disputes between Lebanese farmers (as in the case of the large work team) were based on and resolved through access to Syrian labour. Similarly, conflicts between camp dwellers (as in the case of Anwar) were based on the distribution of work and resolved through patronage relationships based on labour. Friendships and partnerships between the two communities in the first three cases, where it could be said that there was ‘bread and salt,’ were again built on the foundation of reliable labour provision over long periods and pre-Civil War migratory labour patterns.

At its base, this relationship grew from two general, mirrored characteristics in each community. Firstly, there is the Lebanese access to capital, most often in the form of land ownership, and the Syrian’s corresponding ability to gather the labour needed to make this capital profitable. Secondly,

the Lebanese can navigate the Lebanese clan and state networks to protect Syrians from predatory practices and bureaucratic dangers. This is mirrored by the Syrian's respective abilities to navigate and demystify the internal workings of the camp and Syrian community. Throughout the four vignettes, we can see these common features replicated in each kind of relationships.

Furthermore, this fieldwork indicates that, to a large extent, the governance practices in which Syrian refugees and Lebanese hashish farmers engage are in a state of continuity rather than disruption. The practices and relationships described above all predate the refugee crisis. The Syrian Civil War heightened the vulnerability of the Syrians and increased the supply of cheap, unskilled labour, but all of this has occurred within the parameters of a pre-existing socio-economic framework. This fieldwork also indicates a high level of variability in *shawish* systems and responsibilities. My original research plan assumed that the *shawish* was the central governance actor in the camps, and this has certainly been demonstrated in other locations in the Biqa'a (see Sajadian, 2020). As the above ethnography demonstrates, however, the *shawish* is often a shorthand for far more complex and variable relationships and practices. Key actors in the camp's governance and the organisation of labour, such as Anwar and Muhammad, were not *shawish*. Even the credentials of Abu Ibrahim, the nominal *shawish*, were disputed.

These findings have the unsettling implication of echoing Lebanese refrains bemoaning the presence of Syrians that 'they aren't real refugees' and 'they are just here for the money.' Money, indeed, is central to Syrian decisions about where to reside and work. However, as this ethnography shows, humanitarian aid money barely features in this decision – during harvest season, a Syrian can earn the same in a day as the World Food Programme gives them each month. Rather, it is the pull of employment and the corresponding need for workers that structures relationships between the two communities. This ethnography indicates that the work of the 'humanitarian regime' was fairly inconsequential when seen in the light of the more fundamental requirements of labour and capital.

Throughout 2019-20, the Lebanese economic crisis has raised serious obstacles to the continuity of this system. As prices have risen and wages have remained at their nominal value, the longer it takes for trusted employers to pay back wages, the less value the wages have. Smaller farmers have been less able or willing to pay, while Syrians have been more urgently in need of their wages. Many Syrians kept their savings in Syrian or Lebanese lira and were wiped out by the collapse in both currencies. This has gone hand in hand with the results of capital-intensive hashish

production – prices have dropped, the soil has become less fertile, and water sources less reliable. More and more land is only profitable for large-scale, capital intensive farmers. As their share in the market increases, smaller farmers feel the squeeze, straining the relationships described in the first and second vignettes.

The crisis has also sharpened pre-existing social cleavages. For the Lebanese, it has dramatically increased the importance of access to international dollar markets and high liquidity. This manifests in the growing importance of large-scale, capital intensive production, and the end to the division between hashish producers and smugglers. Illicit production has thus replicated broader trends in Lebanese agriculture. Amongst the Syrians, it has sharpened the difference between pure wage labourers entirely reliant on the sale of their labour at market price, and those like Muhammad and Anwar who are able to supplement these arrangements with small-scale investments and long-term bonds of trust. Likewise, the collapse of the lira has enhanced the reputations of large farmers like Hussein as *baqani* whilst simultaneously protecting their profit margins. In many ways, this pressure on pre-existing patron/client relationships whilst simultaneously increasing their importance is a microcosm for the Lebanese social contract as a whole. As the economy has collapsed over 2019-2020, previous patronage arrangements have increasingly been unable to meet the demands of the population; this can be seen in the increasingly frequent civil unrest and protests.

This article has indicated the need for a return to classical themes of class, capital, and labour in our understandings of rural governance. It shows that studies of systems and structures are likely incomplete without an in-depth mapping of capital and labour flows, which may diverge from discursive accounts of governance. A deep understanding of Syrian and Lebanese behaviours is impossible without a clear mapping of the material factors that condition them. It further highlights the centrality of pre-existing governance structures and historical relationships in understanding contemporary refugee governance practices.

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